

Gender Differences in Meiteiron

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This article explores the gender dominance and differences in Meiteiron in some detail with a modest historical explanation. The linguistic evidence argues against the general claim of prior male dominance, particularly the linguistic evidence in archaic Meiteiron. It is argued that the speech of women was not considered inferior, a reflection of the high status women held in pre-Hindu Meitei society. Although there are decidedly matriarchal elements in the modern language, present day Meitei society is very much male dominated.¹

Every society sets up societal norms for men and women which go beyond what would be required by the biological differences between the sexes (Mead 1949:8) so it is reasonable to look for evidence in language reflecting the differences in societal norms for men and women in different cultures. Key (1975:13) remarks that the differences between male and female linguistic behavior is as universal as the sex role is universal and that linguistic sex distinctions undoubtedly occur in every language of the world. The differences are often reflected in

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1. This paper was presented in the 2nd International Conference on South Asian Languages (ICOSAL-II) Jan. 9-11, 1999, held at Punjabi University, Patiala, India.

the lexical items, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of the language.

The speech of women is frequently considered inferior, apparently for no other reason than women speak it. Parents are accustomed to correct the speech of children and of course they make sure that each child is being trained to use sex-appropriate forms. Lakoff (1975:5) remarks that, if a little girl 'talks rough' like a boy she will normally be ostracized, scolded or made fun of by the society. Thus, society through the behavior of parents and friends forces a female child to follow conventions, that is, to behave "appropriately". In Indian dramas women speak Prakrit (Prakrta, the spoken or vulgar language) and men speak Sanskrit (Sanskṛta, the "elevated" language) (Jespersen 1921:241). Sapir (1929), in a study of the Yana language, suggests that the "reduced female form" constitutes a conventional symbol for the lower status of women in the community.

This study of male and female differences in Meiteiron is restricted to (i) lexical items and particular phrasal expressions and (ii) morphological differences. Both "sex-exclusive" and "sex-preferential" differentiation exist in Meiteiron (Bodine 1975). However, the usages are not constrained solely by gender differences but also by age, in that some forms are used by old-men (for example, grandfather) and some by old-women (for example, grandmother). Initially, we shall examine the archaic forms of Meiteiron, which seem to reflect a higher societal position for women and then, we discuss male and female differences in modern Meiteiron.

Many linguistic studies of gender have shown that certain patterns result from male social dominance, a reflection of male dominant posi-

tions in family, economic, political, and legal affairs. However, the claim that archaic Meiteiron shows a pattern reflecting male dominance does not hold true.

Quite the contrary. There is evidence that women held high positions in ancient Meitei society. In Pre-Hindu Meitei society, for example, women played a major role in religion. Religion permeated the life of the people, with women not only active participants in religious ceremonies, but often having a leading role in them. This role is evident from the dominance of women in the goddess cult and in *Umang Lai Haraoba*, *umang* 'forest' *lai* 'deity' *haraoba* 'to please' (a festival for worshipping Pre-Hindu deities). In this the role of priestess is considered much more important than that of the priest (Parratt 1980:96). Not only were women believed to have the power to communicate with spirits and supernatural beings, but women were so central that when a priest performed the rituals of *Lai Haraoba* the priest usually dressed himself as a priestess.

In politics women participated no less than their male counterparts. They were very strong political force in a number of movements, for example, the *Nupilan* or women's movement of 1939, a revolt against colonial oppression and the corruption of monarchy. Another example is when, under the political pressure of women, Maharaja Chandrakriti² (1834-44, 1850-86 A.D.) postponed the catching of elephants until the

2. Chandrakriti was dethroned in 1844 A.D. due to a family feud between the princes over the throne. He became King for the second time in 1850 A.D. and ruled until 1886 A.D.

end of the harvest season (October and November) as the elephant catching was interfering with the harvest. As they were well organised and well aware of politics, they could even correct injustices committed by king and by other high officials (L. Ibungohal Singh, 1969:42-43).

In economics, too, women played a major role, with their participation going way beyond managing economics of the house. In fact, as T.C. Hodson remarks, "the women hold a high and free position in Manipur all internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country being managed by them" (1908:23). Against this background, we shall now analyse the archaic forms of Meiteiron (*i.e.* the pre-Hindu Meiteiron). This analysis will, however, be restricted to the study of (i) forms of address and reference terms, (ii) social titles used for women, and (iii) the order of constituents of words.

Forms of Address and Terms of Reference

In the Pre-Hindu period it seems to have been the Meitei custom for husbands and wives to address one another using their respective personal names. For example, in a dialogue between Pakhangba and his wife Laisana (*Ningthourol Lambuba (An Account of Royal Tours)*, p. 14), one notes that the two addressed one another using personal names. Later, in the same dialogue as well as elsewhere in other dialogues in *Leithak Leikharol (Heaven and the Nether World*, Y. Bheigya Meitei ed. 1967) they also used the reciprocal terms *isabi* 'beloved' and *sanau* 'beloved' with each other (in a later period, the term *isabi* came to be used for males and *sanou* for females). Another instance worth citing is the form '*pan^hoibi khongkun*'⁴ 'in quest of Panthoibi'; in *Panthoibi Khongkun* (M. Chandra Singh ed. 1963:55), while